

A Tribute to President Ronald W. Reagan

The 2005 Silver Anniversary of National Crime Victims' Rights Week is dedicated to President Ronald W. Reagan, who first proclaimed this time-honored national observance on April 8, 1981.

In proclaiming the first National Crime Victims' Rights Week, President Reagan said: "We need a renewed emphasis on, and an enhanced sensitivity to, the rights of victims. These rights should be a central concern of those who participate in the criminal justice system, and it is time all of us paid greater heed to the plight of victims." Twenty-five years later, his eloquent words still ring true.

Consider for a moment the plight of crime victims in 1981.

There were 41.4 million crimes committed in 1981, as compared to 24.2 million violent and property crime victimizations in 2003. "Victims' rights" were virtually an oxymoron, as few existed and even less were implemented in accordance with the nascent law of the era. The federal Crime Victims Fund was not even on the horizon – a Fund that, since established by President Reagan and the U.S. Congress in 1984, has provided over \$6 billion in financial support for victim compensation and victim services from fines, fees and assessments from federal criminal offenders. There were only a handful of programs that provided assistance and support to crime victims, as compared to over 10,000 community- and system-based programs in 2005, including nearly 5,700 programs that receive support from the Crime Victims Fund.

President Reagan literally put crime victims' rights, needs and concerns on the American agenda of public safety and public health concerns. He established clearly and convincingly that *victims' rights are human rights* that affect us all. By establishing his President's Task Force on Victims of Crime in 1981, and then taking its *Final Report* and recommendations to heart, he created a vital venue that made crime victims' needs and rights a *priority* for his Administration and those that followed it, and for our Nation as a whole.

His historical and pioneering efforts on behalf of victims of crime in America are best described by California Judge Lois Haight, who chaired his 1981 President's Task Force on Victims of Crime:

"We need a renewed emphasis on, and an enhanced sensitivity to, the rights of victims.

President Ronald W. Reagan, 1981

"Twenty-five years ago, with few crime victims' rights and very limited victim services, President Ronald Reagan began truly pioneering efforts that created a vision for our field and, for the first time, focused national attention on the plight of victims of crime. Without his efforts, we would not have had the landmark President's Task Force on Victims of Crime, whose 1982 *Final Report* and recommendations resulted in

the creation of the Office for Victims of Crime within the U.S. Department of Justice."

Without the vision and leadership of President Reagan, there would be NO:

- National Crime Victims' Rights Week.
- President's Task Force on Victims of Crime that, in 1982, produced a *Final Report* and 68 recommendations that provided the foundation for victims' rights and services in years to come.
- Office for Victims of Crime within the U.S. Department of Justice established in 1983 that has become America's driving force behind efforts to treat victims with dignity and respect, implement their rights under law, and educate the public about the impact of crime on victims, families and communities.
- Attorney General's Task Force on Family Violence in 1984 that, for the first time, examined the scope and impact of domestic violence in America, and developed recommendations to improve our nation's law enforcement, criminal justice and community response to offenses that, previously, were considered merely "family matters."

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- *National Minimum Drinking Age Act*, which provided strong incentives to states to raise their minimum drinking age to 21 – the national law today.
- National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that was established by President Reagan in 1984.
- Victim/witness programs within *all* U.S. Attorneys' offices, and within the Federal Bureau of Prisons.
- National Child Safety Partnership with 26 member organizations to enhance private sector efforts to promote child safety and public awareness of child abuse.
- Greatly needed public attention and funding to victims of crime in Indian Country.

The timing was right. The leadership was committed. The vision was created. As Former Nevada Governor Robert Miller, a member of Reagan's President's Task Force on Victims of Crime, said: "The time had come, the place was there and, fortunately, President Reagan and Attorney General Ed Meese had the foresight to move forward on it."

Task Force Chair Lois Haight summarizes the influence and impact of Reagan's efforts:

"The 'victims' rights' field as we know it today would *not* exist without the amazing vision and foresight of President Reagan. When crime victims in 2005 are treated with compassion, afforded rights, and have access to services and support, they can join us *all* in thanking and paying tribute to President Ronald Reagan, who paved this vital path to justice."

One of Reagan's predecessors, President Woodrow Wilson, said, "You are not here merely to make a living. You are here to enable the world to live more amply, with greater vision, and with a finer spirit of hope and achievement. You are here to enrich the world."

This "spirit of hope and achievement" described by President Wilson embodies the spirit of the field of crime victim services today. There is no greater tribute to President Ronald Reagan than this legacy.